

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Ray, just state your name for the camera.

Speaker 2: Raymond Larson.

Speaker 1: We're here at Rawlins, Wyoming today.

Speaker 2: Rawlins, Wyoming, yeah.

Speaker 1: The big blizzard of '49, it hit someplace ... Oops, we got to do, we got to do that. I got to do that with mine, too. Shut it off.

Speaker 2: I hate these. Where's ... Hello, yeah.

Speaker 1: January second, the storm hit in a lot of places of Wyoming. I'm not certain if it hit in Rawlins on the second or not, but be that as it may, when the blizzard hit here, it really changed the look of the town, didn't it?

Speaker 2: Certainly. It just kept, day after day, after day, it just kept snowing. The way, from where the post office, it snowed so much that where the post office is now, it filled up, clear up to the top of the high hill, you know, out south of town. You can't even believe how much snow there was.

Speaker 1: Some of the homes?

Speaker 2: Everybody was stuck every place. They had a heck of a time with all the equipment we had at that time, clearing everything out so people could get back and forth. You'd have to talk to Nan about this, but I think they had fixed up some of the high schools and community places so people could come in and eat that couldn't get food and stuff like that.

Speaker 1: I suspect there were a lot of people that were traveling that had to stop here and filled up the town, too.

Speaker 2: Oh yeah, that's the other thing is that I was going to mention that's not a canton thing, but [00:02:00] when they got found, there's just more people coming in, but the other thing I was, nobody was coming through because of all the highways from Larmaie all the way up to Rock Springs were completely shut.

Speaker 1: Were houses completely buried, some of them here in Rawlins?

- Speaker 2: Everything the south side of the tracks were all buried. Different parts of town here, there were some of them that were buried. Some of the big houses that people built were sticking out, but most anything that was a single story squatted one was covered up.
- Speaker 1: I guess your family was in the sheep business and you have the story about some sheep that kind of made it through the blizzard.
- Speaker 2: Yeah. On the way out of town, going south about ten miles out of town, there's a rancher by the name of Boulton that had a herd of sheep, I think it was somewhere around 1500-3000. I'm not sure of the number. Nobody was expecting the weather, you know, and they raised them. But they kept them together so they could feed 'em cause there was a lot of 'em. When the storm hit, the feet got planted and after the storm left, and it started clearing out and they opened the roads so we could drive out, the snow was about eight or nine feet higher than the sheep were. As the summer went by, the snow slowly melt and as we would drive by, all of a sudden we would see an ear sticking out of the snow. You know you'd get down low and hard, it took a [00:04:00] month or so until it got down. It took until it got down, dang near to the ankles before they all fell down. It was like looking at a bunch of statues out there all this time. You'll see how much there is at that area now, fertilizers.
- Speaker 1: After the snow got down around their ankles, they just fell over?
- Speaker 2: Right, they just fell over and nobody could do anything with them. I think a few people come in and got the good horns and stuff like that but that was all.
- Speaker 1: They were frozen solid underneath that drift then?
- Speaker 2: Oh yeah.
- Speaker 1: They had died a long time ago.
- Speaker 2: When they were down about half full because of the wool I went over and they were still frozen inside because it still got pretty cool at night. They were still kind of partially frozen until they got down to that depth. It's really unusual, I'm telling ya. I don't think that's going to ever happen any place else again.
- Speaker 1: Keeping onto ranchers etc, a lot of ranchers couldn't get to the cattle, couldn't get to the sheep, so the air force came to Rawlins with C-47s. They started doing drops of bales of hay
- Speaker 2: Right.

Speaker 1: And I understand that you volunteered to go up with them in the C-47s.

Speaker 2: Yes. Because of my background, I knew where most of the ranchers were all the way up to Rock Springs and back East and stuff. I ended up in a sense, with the planes that they had, fighters didn't know where to go, I [inaudible 00:06:00] [00:06:00] for take off over there. That's what I ended up doing. We did anywhere from four to eight or nine flights a day depending on how fast we could get the hay to the plane. Initially too, that was the funny part that when all the experts from the air force, the belly of a C-47, and if you remember the size of that, they have this long rack that had all these bales sitting on it and when we would fly over the, they'd take the door off, and we'd fly over where we were supposed to drop the hay out, we'd get our hay hooked and start throwing them out one at a time.

It took a long time do to it and we missed the target most of the time. We figured out a method that we had this, basically the same thing, but we made a big slide and we just put the bales up the same way and then we kind of put a turn with a smooth thing out to the door. So when we got where we wanted to drop the hay, the pilot would just head up or turn sideways and then head up and all the hay come tumbling out all by itself. We were able to really dump a lot of hay real quick that way and make a lot more trips.

Speaker 1: Fantastic. Fantastic. I found some footage with hooks, guys throwing ...

Speaker 2: That only happened a short time.

Speaker 1: Yeah. The other method proved to be a lot more effective then?

Speaker 2: Oh yeah. Yeah because we could make double or three times as many trips each day.

Speaker 1: Was it as accurate or was it more accurate?

Speaker 2: It was more accurate because they were all dumped. I had to sit by the pilot it took a little practice so we'd make sure it happened at the same place. We finally [00:08:00] got to the point where we would say, "Okay, Compsy, you know, dump it." He would always get within, I would say, 50 to 100 feet of right on target, but never anything further away than that.

Speaker 1: I understand because they were dropping from such a distance they kind of just exploded when they hit the ground.

Speaker 2: It depends. It depends on how the weather was and everything and if it was good, he would come in pretty close, you know 100 feet away or something like

that. It was just dump it and go on ahead. If the weather was, if it's got a lot of trees and stuff like that, we were in the mountains like a couple trips we made scared the hell out of me, you wouldn't believe it. Anyhow, we would have to fly a little bit different. It depended on the pilot, there were some pilots that just didn't seem to have the knowledge and there's a couple of them like the one we were flying with that, man oh man, he could dump anything anyplace, just exactly in the right place.

Speaker 1: Ace pilot.

Speaker 2: Ace pilot. He's done right, he was an ace pilot.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 2: I've always wondered what happened to him.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Staying with the livestock, you talked about that one terrible loss of that sheep herd, I suspect that quite a few ranchers around the area lost cattle and sheep due to the blizzard?

Speaker 2: Right. It depended. It was bad because they couldn't get in. Within a short time that we're doing this, they realized that they had to do what they could to prepare the area, you know the cows and stuff. Then the other good part about dropping them out, they hay like that, sometimes we would still just use the hay hooks, [00:10:00] would be when we could circle around until we found two or three cows all by themselves. We just dumped a few bales by them. By that time, the pilots were really on line and dropping the hay in the right place. It took a week at least before all the guys figured out how to do it.

Speaker 1: Were you the guy that was telling me the story about, "Make sure you drop it as close to my house as you can"?

Speaker 2: Oh geeze, my uncle's got a ranch out in Rawlins, it was a dude ranch and they have anywhere from 50 to 100 horses there that they have for the dudes. He had this big barn that he put all the hay in during the summer and then they had the sheds off to the side of the barn where he had, you know ... He was smart, too. He had the door fixed up so the bales would slide down. He'd just take 'em over and dump 'em so the cows and the horses could eat there. I helped build them when I was younger.

I'll never forget, he called and he said, "Ray," he said, "Can you guys send out maybe one or two plane loads of hay because I can't get anything to the cows. There's no way I can get feed to 'em." I said, "Sure." We went out and we flew, and he said, "See if you can get it right close to that feed station." I said, "Sure."

So we did. Compsy got em out, twenty, maybe twenty feet too far out and the snow was about six or seven feet deep. He called back in and he says, "Can you come back and make another flight? [00:12:00] But this time get closer?" I'll never forget this. We swooped down, everything is in line, and so we pulled the [inaudible 00:12:10] up and just went along and du, du, du, du, and we succeeded in being too close to the barn about six feet, so we just broke, completely destroyed all the feeding sheds he had. As we were going off, he's sitting there cursing, "You yeah yeah yeah." I can't forget that.

Speaker 1: That's great. Do you recall and fatalities in the area from the storm?

Speaker 2: I don't recall and fatalities.

Speaker 1: I don't think there were too many in Wyoming. I think there's only about 16 total.

Speaker 2: The only thing I can remember is I read about there was some and it was basically all due to somebody being stuck out in the snow with no food and stuff and couldn't get in and they couldn't locate a rancher.

Speaker 1: Did you hear about out towards Wamsutter, sheep man, a sheep herder being kind of stranded out there without food? They sent a sherman tank out?

Speaker 2: You know, I heard about that but I wasn't involved with that.

Speaker 1: Okay, good. What else? Why don't we talk about the Stan Camp story. Let's set this up right for our audience though, and make sure that we tell them that this was after the initial bad storms ...

Speaker 2: Right.

Speaker 1: ...But it was still bad outside.

Speaker 2: Right.

Speaker 1: The weather was still kind of bad.

Speaker 2: When I grew up, [00:14:00] the state of Wyoming wasn't a big city, everybody, we didn't do cowboy music basically too much then. We were all into the good smooth jazz, you know. The '30s [inaudible 00:14:18] and stuff like that. This is in 1949, same year, except it was in, our graduating class graduated, which is in May I think. We went into the hotel down in Sinclair which is just east of Town, and I talking with the guys that were hired, and I said, "Make sure you get

something you can dance to cause we're all into jitterbuggin." We went in and the music was so damn bad, we couldn't even dance to it.

I went back out and my girlfriend was mad and other people were all mad and I'm leaning against the wall, watching the entrance to this hotel that we had rented down in Parco, at that time, in Wyoming. While I'm standing there, I see this huge, you know not a regular bus, but the big buses that they use to travel around this neck of the woods. For several years, they'd have dances throughout the state, in different states and stuff out in the country. These guys started coming in, and I'm standing there and this one tall blond guy comes up and he said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "Well," I said, I told him the story I just told you. He said, "Ah, the music can't be that bad." He said, "Come on [00:16:00] with me. Take me in and I'll listen." We got about two thirds of the way so he could just kind of hear the music, and he says, "You're right. Stop, let's get the hell out of here."

We walked back out and he had me stay where I was when he introduced himself. He went down and he started talking to all these people to come in, at that time, I didn't know it was Stan Kenton's larussa. He come back up and he says, "Hey, we got here a month early. We're supposed to go to, down in the town East of us to do a dance hall out in the country. But then it was a month early, so we're turning around and coming back. The weather is kind of getting bad." Because we still had 15 foot things against the highway. They decided to stay overnight in Saint Clair. I said, "Cool."

He went down and he talked to these guys and then he come back and he says, "Hey, we're from the Stan Kenton orchestra, we're supposed to do a gig. If you would get some guys," cause he said something about my music background, he said, "You know how to set the orchestra up." We went out the bus guy, we took all the instruments and all the stuff and set it up just like he sees in the big city, you know, so it was all ready to go. Then he went upstairs and took a shower and they came back down started playing for us. Man, you couldn't believe it. The world's greatest music, our high school had, everybody just raising hell. Within an hour, everybody within the town of Saint Clair and Rawlins, all the older kids and guys out of the service, they were down there dancing. By two o'clock in the morning, people were coming in from all [00:18:00] four corners of the state. We must have had a couple thousand people there. They just played til 6 o'clock in the morning. It was the damndest thing I've ever seen.

Then, we got over that night, and then the next morning, they got ready to take off, and they had to drive to Rawlins to get out of town, another snow storm hit, and they got snowed in in Rawlins for another week. We had to take all the musicians, now Stan Kenton wasn't there, two other major guys in the band weren't there, but all the rest of them were. We have a whole bunch of bars in

Rawlins and dance halls, and you know, the whole smear. We had a week of jam sessions and every damn bar in Rawlins with all these guys starring in it noon and going til midnight and that type of thing.

There wasn't enough room for all of them to stay in motels and stuff. I know my mother had a big house, and she had three extra rooms, so she had three guys, Bud Jake, and a few of those guys, I can't remember the other name of this other guy, but they were a part of the band, they went up and stayed at my mother's house. Then other people, ladies, you know old timers, had extra rooms in the big houses. It was funny because up until about year before my mother died, which was 20 years later, this one guy that stayed overnight there, every time he traveled as a musician, he'd call mother up and say, "Hey Martha, this is da da da, you got a room?"[00:20:00]" She just had such a ball, the two of them just got along together. It brings tears to my eyes.

Speaker 1: That's great. Was Willie Nelson a component to this?

Speaker 2: Oh yeah. Nobody's going to believe this. You know how you always know his long hair and all that?

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Speaker 2: Well anyhow, there's a bar that was on the other side of the town, there's a street. There's another bar there and dance hall. Jake says, "Hey, we've never been over there, let's couples go over and take a look." We walked in and Willie Nelson, literally, this is the truth, it was the first contract that he ever had. He finally got an agent, and the agent says, "Okay, make sure that I don't screw up," this is what he said, Willie Nelson said this, "I want to send you to this little town in Wyoming and see how you do so you get used to it so when you get out into my good accounts, it won't be screwed up." And he said, "Fine."

They went over and then went back and got a few more guys and they went in there and Willie Nelson was dressed in these impeccable suits, his hair was all oily and greased back and everything, you wouldn't believe how he looked. They started playing a little bit of cowboy music with him, but he got into some of the jazz and him and the other guys, they got in playing jazz with the whole crew. From noon on, for the week,, we were having jam session after jam session. I'll tell you, those days, you didn't have good recorders or anything like that, the movies, you know like the things you get now, but you got history. [00:22:00]

Speaker 1: Yeah. I was really kind of struck with you mom taking these band members in and other people in the community taking people in. This seems to be a story I run into a lot during this whole blizzard research I've been doing, is that

generosity of people in Wyoming to take maybe stranded travelers in, the hotels would fill up and just very generous people.

Speaker 2: We all know what it's like when the snow hits, you know. You want to protect your butt and everybody, regardless how snotty they are in the summer, everything changes when it starts snowing. It worked out. Good bunch of people in Wyoming, let me put it that way.

Speaker 1: That's all I got.

Speaker 2: I'm glad that you asked me and that I can do this.

Speaker 1: This was good, Ray. This was a good interview. Thank you so much.

Speaker 2: We'll see what we can do in the future.

Speaker 1: Yes indeed. Okay, let's cut.